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**Fast-fashion consumption in Canada: The attitude-behaviour gap in changing  
consumer's behavior**

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## **Abstract**

The fast-fashion industry's prominence continues to grow yet consumers still remain in the dark on the socio-economic and environmental impacts of the industry. This study attempts to not just understand the consumer's awareness of these impacts but also to identify opportunities to change their shopping behaviour along with any barriers to change that exist. A total of 14 interviews amongst Canadian consumers were conducted and analysed using grounded theory methodology. The analysis reveals that consumers have very limited knowledge of the industry's impact and their continual contribution to the industry are centered around culture, lack of awareness, budgeting and price, self-perception, and resistance to alternatives. This analysis shows that cultural influences and one's self-identity is a significant motivator behind fast-fashion consumptions and not just price-sensitivity. These revelations may be of interest to sustainability leaders and leaders of high-quality apparel brands that are interested in acquiring fast-fashion consumers.

Key words: fast-fashion, sustainability, socio-economic, attitude-behaviour gap

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## **1. Introduction**

Fast-fashion is both a concept and model in the fashion and retail industry that has categorically shifted the way consumers shop for apparel. The concept was developed for retailers to gain a competitive advantage by quickly turning inventory over. This was achieved by producing collections in limited quantities and developing a supply chain that was both agile and reactive. Developing an agile supply chain is critical to a fast-fashion retailer's success as the retailer must be able to quickly respond to changing fashion trends and consumer demands. The success and purpose of fast-fashion is to rapidly produce apparel, inspired by fashion presented on global runways, and at low price-points to both younger consumers and fashion-focused consumers. Due to the speed at which the clothing is produced, quality tends to be deprioritized in the industry with consumers accepting, if not anticipating, that they are not purchasing clothing with high durability. The most successful fast-fashion retailers are those that are able to combine short life-cycles, limited supply, and cheap, on-trend clothing with a sense of scarcity. Consumers purchasing fast-fashion have less of an opportunity to debate on an item when shopping as the garment is likely to be out-of-stock shortly, since the model turns inventory so quickly. Consumers thus justify the low price-point and purchase the item so they are not left with post-purchase regret. Fast-fashion retailers understand that "consumers are more responsive when there are limited time windows to purchase a product or when anticipated product availability in the next store visit is low" which creates an increasingly faster turnover rate (Byun & Sternquist, 2011).

While fast-fashion is not a relatively new concept, with the most well-known retailers being Zara and H&M, the industry's prominence has grown over recent years due to the saturation of media covering fashion news, international fashion shows, and celebrity style. Social media has only intensified this coverage providing more space in the fast-fashion industry for retailers to not only saturate the market but create competition within each other.

The fast-fashion model could be pressured into becoming even faster with start-ups basing their model on the connectivity of social media platforms, such as *Choosy*, entering the marketplace (Porter, 2018). Choosy uses algorithms on Instagram comments to analyze which designs and styles will be popular and the company's supply chain is such that items are made to order, reducing inventory liabilities (Porter, 2018). Thus, fast-fashion retailers may become ever more responsive to changing consumer fashion trends.

Due to the responsivity of fast-fashion, the concept has made itself part of popular culture (Shambu, 2015). The industry has seeped into popular culture such that luxury fashion models are blurring their lines and co-branding with fast-fashion retailers to remain relevant. Luxury fashion brands have become more accessible due to fast-fashion retailers practise in re-creating luxury designs at significantly cheaper prices for consumers. Thus, continuing to impact consumer's purchasing behaviours. Consumers rely on fashion for "greater individual expression" and their unpredictable attitude shifts works well with fast-fashion's agile supply chain to meet increasingly volatile consumption patterns (Taplin, 2014). While quality used to be a significant determinant in brand loyalty within the apparel industry, recent research has shown that perceived value and brand personality may have a greater influence on brand loyalty (Su et al., 2018). Further, research has shown that consumer's identity is so important that fashion drivers outweigh any other purchasing driver, such as sustainability (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

Previous research on fast-fashion is limited to the concept itself, or understanding the attitude-behaviour gap of fast-fashion consumers and the limits within ethical consumption. As a result, there is limited research in understanding the socio-economic impacts along with environmental impacts this industry has on consumers. Research and knowledge gaps lie within consumers awareness of the socio-economic impacts on themselves and the environment. Discussions on the environmental impacts of the industry are beginning to occur and while

research can detail the impacts the industry has, there is a gap in understanding a consumer's awareness of the environmental impacts their purchasing behaviour has. In addition, there is a gap in understanding whether or not a consumer is aware of the socio-economic impacts fast-fashion has on them. Consumers are visiting clothing stores more frequently and making more purchases, resulting in constant spending. Given the fast turnover and continual purchasing, items are often worn a few times only. Yet little is understood if consumers are satisfied with their return on investment or at a minimum, aware of it. In addition, it's not fully understood why consumers feel compelled to make constant purchases. It is also important in understanding the consumer's perceived relationship with the industry and fast-fashion retailers to better understand how consumer's behaviour relates to and impacts these issues. The industry has recognized that socially-conscious consumers do not necessarily purchase ethically and research has tried to understand why this paradox exists. Previous research has referred to this paradox as the "attitude-behaviour gap" (Antonetti et al., 2010; Carrington et al., 2010; Chatzidakis et al., 2006; Jacobs et al., 2018; Martenson, 2018; Shaw et al., 2015)

The purpose of this study is to not only understand Canadian consumer's limits in changing their purchasing behaviour within the apparel industry but also to identify opportunities to change consumer's behaviours. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following research question:

*RQ: "What determines the paradox amongst sustainably-minded Canadian fast-fashion shoppers and where are the opportunities to adjust their shopping behaviour?"*

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Millennials are more likely to have positive attitudes towards sustainable consumption and social impacts, yet they are the target market for fast-fashion (Change, et al., 2018). This presents an undeniable contradiction. There has been increasing public pressure on the industry to produce sustainable clothing or for companies to incorporate more sustainable practices in

their business model but the pressure is not met with consumer demand (Jacobs, et al., 2018). In fact, data suggests that of the “30% of consumers who have positive attitudes towards responsible products, only around 3% translate their attitudes into consumption choices” (Antonetti, et al., 2014). Yet, the concept of “slow fashion” whereby consumers are opting for apparel that is produced and marketed in a way which “opposes the socially, environmentally, and competitively unsustainable nature of fast-fashion” is on the rise (Brodish, et al., 2011). Furthermore, slow fashion also calls for consumers to better understand the processes behind the garment’s production and whether this is part of the consumer’s value system. As a result, retailers like H&M are responding with sustainability programs. The prevalence of this concept is important to understand, especially within a Canadian context.

This type of inconsistency can be explained by the attitude-behaviour gap. While there is substantial research on an attitude-behaviour gap existing in the industry, a better understanding is needed on what causes the gap, specifically, the barriers. Current research has found that consumers are more motivated to purchase sustainable clothing if the practice is correlated to their “individual value priorities” rather than the good of society (Jacobs, et al., 2008). Inconsistencies in the attitude-behaviour gap can be as a result of ethical consumption behaviours reflecting “identity issues” rather than being restricted to consumption contexts (Shaw, et al., 2015). This research has shown that while consumers may “care about” the implications of the fast-fashion industry, whether it be environmental or socio-economic, their “caring” does not necessarily translate into “care-giving”, whereby the consumers action their concerns in their behaviour (Shaw, et al., 2015). What consumers “care about” relates more to their self-identity and if their self-identity has little correlation to environmental impacts, than they are less likely to adjust their behaviour to reflect the pressures society has recently demanded on the industry. One’s self-identity could be comprised of many factors such as education, social standing, religious affiliation, income, and more, but there appears to be a

stigma against being identified as environmentally concerned (Johnstone, 2015). Stigma can be a result of consumers fearing they will be identified with a group that has negative societal perceptions. Consumer's perceptions of the industry's implications thereby heavily influence their consumption behaviours. Consumers may be hesitant to change their behaviour in fear of being associated with this stigma, presenting a barrier to changing behaviours. Consumers thus could feel that so long as they express concern over fast-fashion's implications, that they are justified in not substantially changing their behaviour. The theory of neutralization further supports this idea. Neutralization, a cognitive process, can assist consumers in dealing with feelings of regret or guilt about their shopping behaviour that is not aligned to their attitudes, by displacing blame (Chatzidakis et al., 2006). Consumers can blame the industry for the magnitude, can argue that their actions will have little impact, or point to the limited options to change their behaviour. Furthermore, recent research, using The Planned Behaviour Model argues that it is not attitude that would result in a change in behaviour, but rather drivers of self-identity and ethical obligation (Bray et al., 2010). Therefore, it is pertinent to understand how the Canadian consumer perceives themselves and what they believe their obligation to be within the industry to change their behaviour.

The attitude-behaviour gap is not necessarily a result of a lack of concern for the implications the industry represents but can be a result of consumer's reasoning behind purchases. Antonetti and Maklan (2014) suggest that consumer's purchasing decisions can be categorized in two ways: consumers decide on the purchase based on the "relative importance of self-interested or altruistic goals" and on the "context as either public or private". As previously noted, consumers heavily rely on the fashion industry to self-express their identity and views. This can begin to explain the paradox that exists between consumers. Publicly, they will express concern over these issues, but their self-interest will ultimately override their concern and their purchases will contradict their public concern. This is aligned to Shaw's

“caregiving” concept. Therefore, the research conducted in this study will seek to determine the missing link between consumers caring and actioning their concern. Furthermore, Martenson (2018) explained that consumer’s idealistic selves are used to predict purchasing behaviour but it is necessary to “activate consumer’s pragmatic” self. This study will seek to initiate participant’s pragmatic self as to better understand their behaviour and consumption habits.

Numerous studies have been conducted to comprehend fast-fashion consumer’s purchasing behaviour. Research by McNeill and Moore (2015), has grouped consumers into three groups: “self”, “social” and “sacrifice”, using the developmental theory model. The results of this study links together a relationship between the consumer’s “perceptions of fashion as functional or self-representing the influence of peer groups, and levels of knowledge about the industry (McNeill & Moore, 2015). The study reveals “self” consumers are indifferent to the impacts and thus continue to buy fast-fashion; “social” consumers are interested in changing their behaviour due to an increased interest in the impacts; whereas sacrifice consumers have negative feelings towards fast-fashion and are highly concerned with the impacts (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This is important to the research question as it assists in explaining the level of willingness to change behaviour but lacks an understanding if there is an opportunity to change behaviour amongst the “self” and “social” consumers and what is required to do so.

The intention-behaviour gap can also explain the paradox this study is attempting to understand at the consumer’s moment of truth. Carrington, et al. (2010) created a holistic conceptual model to better understand the intention-behaviour gap using three insights: *implementation intentions*, *actual behavioural control* (ABC), and situational context (SC). To initiate action based on the consumer’s intent, the model revealed that consumers need to be reminded of their intent at the point of purchase, increase their knowledge, and rely on in-store



influence from staff members (Carrington, et al., 2010). This study recognizes the underlying issue with the paradox of the research question: when consumers intend to make better purchasing decisions but then do not. This framework heavily relies on consumer's in-store experience and neglects the consumer's experience online and the influence of social media. Therefore, further analysis needs to be done to understand how consumer's intention-behaviour gap can be reduced especially with the previously mentioned prevalence of social media. Other research on intention-behaviour gap argues that intention is not a precursor in decision-making like other leading research reveals, but factors such as experience, cynicism, information, price sensitivity, and more (Bray, et al., 2010).

Most notably missing from these studies is the socio-economic impacts the fast-fashion industry has on consumers themselves. The focus of these studies is centred around ethical consumption and sustainability rather than the direct financial and psychological impacts. As a result, this study will include a focus on the socio-economic impacts, centered around financial stress and sociological pressures. By initiating the participant's pragmatic self and not focusing on sustainability impacts only, but also socio-economic impacts, this study will attempt to understand the attitude-behaviour gap amongst Canadian consumers and how their consumption behaviours can be altered.

### **3. Methodology**

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, qualitative research conducted using interviews was identified as the most appropriate method of data collection. Snowball sampling was used when selecting participants for interviews. The first few participants were peers or previous professional colleagues who were active fast-fashion participators and would then recommend connections or peers that they believed would provide informative insight for the research. In total, there were 14 participants ranging from ages 22 to 34 (see Table 1). This sample included 9 women and 5 men and all Canadian. There were more women interviewed

than men as research has shown women produce the most demand of fast-fashion and have the least awareness of the “social impact of their fashion consumption” (McNeill & Moore, 2015). The sample came from a diverse professional and academic background to ensure a diversity of data and at a minimum have had to shop at a fast-fashion retailer in the past year. Interviews, lasting roughly 20 minutes to half an hour each, were recorded when permission was provided, otherwise, interviews were carefully transcribed during the interview. Data collection ended once the information obtained reached saturation with no new, additional insights inferred from the interviews. After the 14 participant’s interviews were analysed, it was clear the data collection would not lead to additional or informative data related to the research question.

Table 1 – Demographic characteristics of participants

Participant #	Age	Gender	City	Occupation/Industry
1	22	Male	Toronto	Student
2	23	Male	Etobicoke	Construction
3	24	Female	Mississauga	Public Service
4	24	Female	Vaughn	Student
5	35	Female	Mississauga	Human Resources
6	29	Female	Toronto	Marketing Strategist
7	34	Female	Etobicoke	Director of Sustainability
8	33	Female	Woodbridge	Buyer
9	24	Female	Ottawa	Marketing Coordinator
10	27	Male	Oakville	Consultant
11	26	Female	Toronto	Ecommerce Coordinator
12	25	Male	Toronto	Sales
13	23	Female	Mississauga	Analyst
14	25	Male	Toronto	Student

Given the sample size, this study cannot claim to generalize the opinions of all Canadian consumers. Social desirability bias, whereby participants answer questions less honestly if they perceive their answers to be undesirable by public opinion, is an implication and concern in this research (Gittleman, et al., 2015). The interview was structured in three sections. The initial section was to understand the participant’s behaviour within the industry, the second pertained

to questions of sustainability and the last section consisted of questions pertaining to socio-economic issues. For participants who were not as familiar with the industry or implications, they were provided a definition and data from the initial research whenever they felt challenged by a question. Lastly, each interview formally began with the participant's definition of the fast-fashion industry to comprehend their understanding of the industry but whether their perceptions of the industry were negative, neutral, or positive. Each interview was completed in person or over the phone and transcribed for further analysis. The in-depth interviews addressed the following topics: the consumer's relationship with fast-fashion including their knowledge and self-perception, their awareness and insight into the environmental impacts, the socio-economic impacts of the industry, and identify any opportunities to change behaviour. Each question always attempted to initiate the participant's pragmatic self. Given that understanding consumer's individual barriers and motivations impeding changing behaviours, a qualitative approach to data collection was pursued, as previously noted. Therefore, grounded theory methodology was applied when analyzing the participant's answers. Grounded theory methodology is conducive to the "discovery of inductive theory" (Wiesche, et al., 2017). Grounded theory begins with coding data in an open coding process where quotations are assigned a high-level, broad theme (Wiesche, et al., 2017). Then axially coding is applied to further analyze the data (Wiesche, et al., 2017). NVivo – a qualitative analysis software – was used to code the data and identify themes and thereby systematically structure the results.

#### **4. Results**

In this section, the results of the study are presented to understand Canadian consumer's relationship to the fast-fashion industry, their understanding of it, and if there are opportunities to change their behaviour. Culture, lack of awareness, budget, self-perception and image, along with resistance to alternatives are themes that were realized from the data analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Themes identified through interview results

<b>Culture</b>	Societal pressures
	Fashion norms
	Shopping as entertainment
<b>Lack of Awareness</b>	Limited knowledge on environmental impacts
	Limited knowledge on socio-economic impacts
	Unaware of sustainable alternatives
<b>Budget and Price</b>	Strict or limited budget
	Hedonic feelings of enjoying the "hunt" or deal
	Unwilling to spend much on a trendy item
<b>Self-perception and Image</b>	Social media
	Donate for self-fulfilling reasons
	Lack of motivation
<b>Resistance to Alternatives</b>	Perception sustainable clothing is expensive
	Skeptical of sustainable programs and/or clothing
	High quality clothing is irrelevant
	Unwillingness to adopt other shopping behaviours

#### 4.1 Culture

Culture holds significant importance on consumer's relationship to the fast-fashion industry. Societal pressures were consistently mentioned by participants as to why they make fast-fashion purchases in the frequency they did. Participant 4 feels "[v]ery pressured from society for me to have the new shirt, the new purse and by seeing all these things I am able to get sucked into this cycle." Another example is provided by Participant 3: "[y]ou always have to be in trend, it's very non-stop." Participant 8 reveals pressure to make continual pressures due to patterns she has developed: "I do feel slightly pressured to stay on trend partially because of my own patterns I have developed where I feel like I have created an expectation for myself and my peers to be on trend." We see that culture, specifically within the Canadian context influences consumers to make continual purchases within the fast-fashion industry. This demonstrates that consumers are impacted beyond traditional marketing methods. In fact, participants rarely referred to traditional advertisements as an influence for them to visit fast-fashion retailers.

Variety and options are also consistently mentioned amongst participants as a reason why they need to purchase in the volumes in which they do. This is a consistent norm amongst consumers who desire variability in their wardrobe. To achieve this, participants require continual updates to their wardrobe in fear their outfits become stagnant. Additionally, several participants identified a motivator to shop at fast-fashion as a cure to boredom or a weekend activity. Thus, fast-fashion shopping is a source of entertainment for some Canadian consumers. As previously noted, fast-fashion is steeped in consumer's everyday culture and this was also noted by Participant 2: *"[f]ast-fashion is driven by pop culture, advertisements, as much mainstream advertising that you're exposed to, affects the way you shop. It's just everywhere"*. It appears that fast-fashion shopping amongst the participants was of an inconsequential nature and the paradox exists recognizing the potential consequences of their behaviour is not top of mind. To change their behaviour, consumers would need to rely on other sources of entertainment and no longer feel societal pressure. Thus, a barrier to change behaviour and motivator to participate in fast-fashion is heavily derived from society and its pressures.

#### **4.2 Lack of awareness**

When participants were asked to define the fast-fashion industry, to understand the depth of their knowledge of the industry, all the participants understood the industry's quick response to fashion trends. There was inconsistency amongst the participants in terms of clothing quality along with whether the consumer had positive or negative feelings towards the industry. The lack of awareness began when the participants were asked if they were aware of the environmental impact or socio-economic implications of their fast-fashion behaviours. When asked on sustainability within the industry, Participant 4 said *"I understand it is important. I know that everything we throw away goes into the landfills and doesn't get recycled. Countries that provide us clothing like its nothing, are being polluted"*. Participant

14 says *"I do not have strong feelings towards sustainability, simply because I have not taken the time to learn more about it. I am aware of the environmental impacts of fast-fashion, but not as much as I would like to be. I know that fast-fashion produces a lot of pollution and toxic chemicals around the world, into our water and air."* Only two participants appeared to have in-depth knowledge on the actual environmental impacts of the industry. Participant 9 revealed the below on the environment impacts:

*"Sustainability matters to me a lot. I think about all aspects of sustainability every day and try my best to be an ethically-minded person as well as consumer. So, whether that means recycling or picking products with less packaging, I would say I am mindful of sustainability in all aspects of life. Through the environment, there are so many issues happening specifically from the apparel industry through dyes that are being used, distressing techniques that are being used. Water contamination from chemicals used to create wrinkle-free fabrics and other technical fabrics. Athletic wear is a huge issue for the environment since it is designed to wick away stressed it doesn't deteriorate the same way in landfills. So, in general, I have a good base of knowledge of issues in the retail industry but there is always so much to learn and we probably know just the tip of the iceberg as to what these companies are actually doing."*

Her insight is informative but she admits *"I am a consumer and I am still price driven 50% of the time especially where I am in my life"* and thus recognizes that it is difficult to make purchasing behaviour changes due to the low-prices of the industry and her current budget.

In addition, a lack of awareness was presented when participants were asked if they purchased sustainable clothing. While the majority have at one point, only 2 recall it being a conscientious decision. A higher price-point is noted for being a reason why sustainable clothing purchasing is not a common practice. Participant 6 would consider making more sustainable purchases: *"I can understand the higher price point, of a 10-15% increase because*

*it's sustainable.*” Participant 8’s insight on a lack of awareness was informative and aligned with previous research: *“I think awareness is what motivates people and myself to change. The thing is like most others, I operate a lot based on self-desire, self-interest and convenience so I have to be hit over the head with information to really make a change.”* She demonstrates that changing her behaviour goes beyond changing her attitude, which supports Bray et al. (2010)’s previous research. She reveals she has implemented processes to change her behaviour but notes none are a result of external factors, but from financial stress. Participant 8 is an example of a consumer who is weighed down by the socio-economic factors fast-fashion presents to consumers.

#### **4.3 Budget and Price**

The low prices associated to fast-fashion garments is a leading factor in creating prevalence in consumer’s association to fast-fashion. In luxury fashion, the price points are a barrier to entry and as consumers continue to seek individual expression through their fashion choices, fast-fashion presents consumers a means to fulfill their hedonic needs. A common motivator for frequenting fast-fashion retailers along with why the participants purchase fast-fashion relates to their budget on apparel shopping. Yet, most participants admitted they are not completely aware of the amount of money they spend on fast-fashion. While most have a budget, they do not necessarily feel confined to stay within that budget. Participants also revealed they enjoy the feelings they have post-purchase: *“I am such a bargain shopper. It’s a hunt for me”* (Participant 3) while Participant 2 admits he is *“tempted by the low prices”* in the industry. Participants also noted their need to justify their spending on clothing, especially if it was trendy clothing or clothing they knew they would only wear a few times: Participant 10 purchases fast-fashion so he *“can get rid of them and don’t need to worry about it”* as he *“feels rational spending \$5 on a t-shirt”*. Participant 11 states *“It’s hard to justify a high quality “party dress” or specific item for an event if I know I won’t wear it a lot.* Participant 12 states that the

low prices can entice him to purchase items he doesn't need: *"Sometimes I buy something I actually don't need and yes, I feel financially stressed if I buy too much clothing"*. Participant 9 shows how societal pressures and the industry's low prices can impact her purchasing behaviour and partake in the industry when she would prefer to distance herself: *"I find myself hating myself by taking part of something I don't believe just because it's out of necessity or cost"*. She reveals negative feelings towards the industry that other participants also revealed. Participant 12, whose main motivator for shopping at fast-fashion is for budgeting reasons states: *"I feel guilty because I know that the quality is bad and the production and the whole life cycle is not eco-friendly at all. Furthermore, child labour, exploitation of the poorest in developing country is also related with it. I try to keep it to a minimum and I am trying to change it step by step"* and admits he intends to change his shopping behaviour once he earns enough. Respondent 8 revealed the financial difficulties the industry has imposed on her:

*"I do experience stress on my finances from shopping and yes, I have taken on debt due to my clothing purchases. I have significantly stopped being this irresponsible with shopping in the last 2 years and now only use cash for my purchases unless I feel it is better to use my credit card and keep my cash for another reason. Shopping does not cut into taking care of any of my expenses but it does cut into me saving money. I am now challenging myself to re-prioritize my saving over shopping."*

There was no specific consensus if participants would change their behaviour if they knew more about the environmental impacts. Many participants cited financials as a factor for them to reconsider changing behaviour and before considering changing their behaviours they would need to reflect on their financial situation. All participants reported to have either had or currently experience financial stress from their fast-fashion shopping habits. Participant 3 reveals her financial stress is a result of the societal pressure she feels: *"You don't want to outfit*



*repeat. It [societal pressures] impacts it [spending] a lot because I just want to stay on trend and be relevant”.*

#### **4.5 Self-Perception**

As previously noted, societal pressure plays a role in a consumer’s decision to purchase fast-fashion in the frequency and volume they do. Concern over how the participant will be perceived by friends, family, and colleagues is a motivator to shop and frequently update their wardrobe. With the increasing saturation of social media into mainstream media, social media is playing a significant role in the consumer’s ability to create their persona and thus meet society’s expectations. Participant 13 stated: *“Social media can definitely impact fast-fashion purchases for me”*. Participant 10 relies on Instagram and believes it is important as he can leverage social media to give him a ‘level of visibility’. What is evident is the impact social media has on purchasing behaviour as discussed by Participant 9:

*“With the Instagram culture we live in and the amount of visual content we see, which is lovely to look at, it’s just pretty influential in terms of what you like what you buy who you look for advice so I think social media is pretty influential in putting things in front of you that you may not have searched for our your own but an influencer’s whose opinion you trust and respect can definitely influence a consumer’s decision.”*

Participant 3 reveals how societal pressures impacts her self-perception. When asked if social media impacts her fast-fashion purchases she said: *“Yes, because you don’t want to outfit repeat”* thus insinuating the need to constantly update her wardrobe with new purchases. Participant 8 notes: *“Once I have posted an outfit on social media, particularly Instagram, I will not post it again nor will I be inclined to wear it again, unless it is in a different setting.”* When participants were asked how social media impacts their purchases, friends and family appeared to be just as important. Participant 8 was adamant in how relevant social media was for her in her purchasing behaviour and her response is the most telling in terms of

understanding social media's influence in fast-fashion purchases. She notes that her purchasing behaviour begins and ends with social media, particularly Instagram, as she finds the retailers and looks to imitate and then uses the channel to post her looks. Of the process, she says:

*“I love my clothes and the looks I put together and I love documenting it on my social media. If I do not get a good enough photo to post I am usually upset and justify it as “ok at least I can wear this again and have another opportunity to post it”. I don’t however feel like I am doing this for praise or likes as I don’t generate that much attention on social media I do think it’s because I myself love my outfits and want them to be captured as a keepsake and collection of looks I am proud of putting together.”*

As previously mentioned, intention-behaviour gap research has been limited to consumer's in-store experience but little is understood about the influence of social media. The results show that social media can often be the first touchpoint that creates that intention to buy fast-fashion, with little opportunity to remind the consumer of the impacts. Therefore, this can begin to explain the intention-behaviour gap in consumers.

Furthermore, participants revealed that they donate for self-fulfilling reasons, which allows many to justify their purchases. All revealed they donate at a minimum. Some will discard the item or sell the items to consignment stores. Participant 2 revealed when he is buying fast-fashion he justifies the purchases by knowing it will one day get donated: *“It’s not just me I’m buying for”*. Other participants felt similarly as commented by Participant 4: *“I feel good when I donate”* and Participant 5: *“I’m giving back”*. Participant 3 is the only participant who actively participates in the circular economy. All participants revealed they donate garments they no longer wear and in fact it is often a reason to justify continual purchases as commented by Participant 5: *“I feel good when I donate, it justifies more purchases because I am giving back”*. When asked if a surplus of apparel at donation centres would make them reconsider donating as a way to justify purchases, 12 of the participants

would re-consider while the other 2 state that for lifestyle reasons, they could not continue to wear worn out or out-dated clothing. It is unclear how much importance donating has on consumer's purchases, but the findings reveal that consumers use donating as a neutralizer. As previously discussed, consumers use neutralization to rid feelings of guilt or dissonance and in most cases, participants appear to neutralize their shopping behaviour by knowing they can donate and serve the community. An opportunity to change consumer's behaviour would be to educate the consumer on the garment's life cycle after donation.

#### **4.6 Resistance to Alternatives**

Respondents have some resistance in changing their behaviour and relationship to the fast-fashion industry. Most participants do not purchase sustainable clothing because of the price point or the lack of awareness on the options available to them. Interestingly, and different from previous research, no participant revealed hesitation in purchasing sustainable clothing due to the unfashionability of the item. The hesitation stems from perceived higher cost, lack of knowledge and lack of alternatives. Participant 9 is skeptical of both sustainable clothing and programs:

*"I would like to purchase more but I find it's difficult because even if you purchase at traditional fast-fashion retailers it is still being manufactured in these countries and the processes are similar to fast-fashion so it is really difficult to make sustainable purchases and understand who is sustainable. But it definitely has a price increase and takes more effort to find."*

The majority of participants are hesitant to adopt a limited wardrobe, whereby the number of garments is fewer and of high-quality to endure the increased usage. Participant 10 admits he would be *"discouraged by the lack of variability"* while Participant 3 has tried the concept but stopped because she was fearful of what people would say: *"I don't want people to say 'she's*

wearing that again’’. There are some participants who are either interested in applying the concept to their life or are in the midst. Participant 9:

*“I suppose there still exists that perception that you don’t want to be “seen” wearing something over and over again – especially if you are going to events and let’s say wear the same dress every time. But I do try to maintain a reasonable wardrobe and would feel good about owning a limited wardrobe so long as I had classic and versatile pieces. I think friends, family and peers would view me in a positive way if I was still appearing put together and even more so if I explained the reasons for my choices.”*

However, Participant 5 commented that her social responsibility would make her reconsider her behaviours: *“I don’t want to be part of contributing to the footprint that is going to cause this world to not be a better place for the generations to come so maybe I will reconsider the quality or the quantity”*. Participant 8 revealed to be interested by the “challenge” a limited wardrobe would present to her but ultimately reveals, *“being curious and living in an age of constant exposure to trends and social engagement, gaining peer respect and recognition I think influences myself to explore a lot more wardrobe options as opposed to a limited one.”*

More notably, quality is a factor that is less prevalent in the consumer’s mind when shopping. The findings in this study shows a contradiction in the consumer’s mind on quality. Every participant revealed quality is important to them. In addition, not every participant perceived fast-fashion garments to be synonymous of low-quality, in fact some mention they have noticed an increase in quality. Participant 8 stated: *“I wouldn’t define my fast-fashion purchases as low quality”* while Participant 5 notes that new factories in Europe have led to better quality. It’s important to note that Participant 5 could did not mention which fast-fashion retailers had switched their production to Europe so this information can be misleading. These responses can be an implication of social desirability bias. The consumer appears to care about quality but those that understand the quality of the garments to be of low quality, find this

acceptable due to the low the price points. Overall, there is a lack of consensus in participant's resistance but each consumer has a resistance in terms of changing their behaviour.

## **5. Discussion**

The research presented in this study reveals new insights into consumer's fast-fashion consumption habits while also providing more insight on the consumer's attitude-behaviour gap and intention-behaviour gap that prevents them from not only acting on the information they know about the industry's impact but also limiting their awareness on the impacts. Therefore, this study contributes to existing research and literature on these issues. This study was built upon research of Antonetti et al., 2010; Carrington et al., 2010; Chatzidakis et al., 2006; Jacobs et al., 2018; Martenson, 2018; and Shaw et al., 2015. While some insights had already been revealed in other research, this study provides new insights that can be useful for industry leaders and consumers.

First, culture appears to not only be a motivator in constant fast-fashion purchases but also a reason for participants to continue to purchase. Culture is a significant barrier in changing one's consumption behaviours as societal pressures and norms weigh heavily on consumers. This study reveals that social media is an all-too accessible channel to present the societal pressures and norms that participants reveal to be responsible for their consumption behavior. This is a factor not discussed in previous research. This study presents the importance of understanding the influence of culture on fast-fashion consumers and how steeped fast-fashion is within the consumer's culture. The results in this study show how sociological factors are more influential to the consumer than typical advertising previously was on consumer's shopping behaviour in the sense that an influencer's posts or a friend's post on any social media channel may be more influential in leading to a consumer's point of purchase. By initiating the consumer's pragmatic self, the findings revealed that culture is a major obstacle in moving consumers from caring to "caregiving" as supported by previous research (Martenson, 2018;

McNeill & Moore, 2015). This study reveals that the consumer's idealistic self-cares but their pragmatic self has little inclination to "caregive" due to the cultural implications they feel. Overcoming this barrier is critical to changing consumer's behaviours.

Lack of awareness on the environmental and socio-economic impacts is a barrier to changing consumer's behaviour. Consumers often felt that if their behaviour changed, the impact would be insignificant compared to the difference the consumer would feel amongst their peers and within society. This is aligned to the concept of neutralization where consumers cancel their bad behaviour by displacing blame and thus continue to fulfil their idealistic self (Chatzidakis, et al., 2006; Martenson, 2018). Therefore, increased awareness on the environmental and socio-economic impacts is necessary to communicate to consumers but this will have to come from sustainability leaders as fast-fashion industry leaders will have little reason or motivation to raise awareness on these issues as the effects would be detrimental.

While budget and price are barriers to behaviour change, it is also a reason for consumer's loyalty in fast-fashion. Participants expressed interest in quality but recognized that their expectations of quality in the industry is low and the low price of the garments is ultimately more significant. This could likely be as a result of the age of the participants, as they were either students or young professionals. As previously noted by Bay et al. (2010), price sensitivity is a leading factor in determining purchasing behaviour. Even when asked to keep the same budget but reduce the garment size in wardrobe, culture once again prevented agreement. Therefore, we see participants being price sensitive but also resistant due to societal pressures. The participants either felt they could be judged by peers if they continue to repeat their outfits or that their self-expression would be limited. Perhaps, price sensitivity is not a leading barrier to change as previous research has suggested and rather more attention needs to be focused on the cultural influences surrounding fast-fashion consumers.

How a consumer perceives him-or-herself, especially on social media, further explains the attitude-behaviour gap that is prevalent within the fast-fashion consumer. Self-identity appears to be a barrier to changing consumer behaviour. As argued by Bray et al. (2010) shifting self-identity could have a greater impact on consumer behaviour in the industry than their particular attitudes towards the industry. One's self-identity appears to be heavily influenced by cultural influences, creating a connection between these two themes and its prevalence in the fast-fashion consumer. In addition, a lack of motivation to adjust behaviour was noted as a barrier. Motivation was often connected to responses of neutralization. Participants struggled to understand how their actions could make a great enough impact, as previously noted within consumer's lack of awareness on the issues. Lacking the necessary or appropriate amount of information, prevents consumers from finding motivation to understand their consumption habits, reconsider their behaviour, and make the relevant changes. Lastly, consumers identified positive feelings associated with donating garments. Donating garments tends to be a reason why consumers justified continual purchasing as it releases the consumer from any guilt they may have felt, whether it be financial guilt or consumption guilt. The participant rarely considers the garment's life-cycle post-donation. Increasing awareness on other disposable options or providing further information on donations could also assist in increasing motivation within the consumer to change their behaviour.

Lastly, resistance to alternatives is also revealed to be a contributing factor to the attitude-behaviour gap amongst consumers. Some consumers expressed skepticism in sustainability programs and along with bias on sustainable clothing being expensive or having limited options in purchasing sustainable clothing. In fact, the limited brand knowledge of options was noted amongst all participants. There is a noted resistance to high quality clothing as consumers related high-quality clothing to be classic or basic items rather than fashion-forward items. This ultimately demonstrates the consumer's hesitation to adjust behaviour as

the participant does not believe they can maintain their current style or lifestyle with sustainable options. In addition, participants do not regard a fast-fashion retailer's sustainability program as highly as they regard the retailer's core apparel, revealing that sustainability programs have little relevance to consumers. It is not understood if sustainability programs held by other types of retailers and companies are regarded differently.

This study has revealed informative insight on the factors that limit participant's behaviour from changing while shopping within the fast-fashion industry. This study reveals that similar to what was discussed in the research provided by Bray et al. (2010) changing self-perception may be more important or significant in changing habits than trying to understand the participant's attitudes or intentions. This begins to explain the paradox between consumer's being concerned about the impacts of the industry but doing little to change their behaviour. As noted before, there is a disconnect between consumers caring about the impacts and their behaviour and then "care-giving" whereby they action their concern. This study revealed that in order to change consumer's behaviours, we must better understand consumer's self-perception or self-identity and how culture influences these factors as this appears to create the disconnect in terms of motivating consumers to change their behaviour.

### **5.1 Practical implications**

This research is important for fashion and sustainability leaders in understanding the motivators behind consumer's decisions along with understanding the attitude-behaviour gap and intention-behaviour gap that exists within consumers of the fast-fashion industry.

The research presented in this study identifies culture and self-identity as a significant barrier in changing consumer's mindset. The industry needs to consider the influence society and social media has on consumers and how to leverage culture in changing consumer behaviour. A fundamental change would be required from within society so consumers no



longer felt the pressure to continually update their wardrobe. Sustainability leaders should look towards using prominent influencers to address the pressures consumers feel.

Lack of awareness and resistance to alternatives limits consumers from making changes. The industry should not only raise awareness of the environmental and socio-economic impacts the fast-fashion industry creates, but also present alternatives in a more favourable way. This could be achieved by, once again, using influencers to communicate to consumers, but also promoting the benefits of limited wardrobes and high-quality clothing that will live a longer life-cycle. Co-branding, where luxury fashion and fast-fashion retailers join together to produce a collection at affordable prices does not appear to be an effective method in trying to connect consumers to luxury fashion but rather negatively affects the consumer's perception of the luxury brand. Respondents who expressed interest in luxury fashion typically revealed negative associations to co-branding.

Participants reveal that they are often drawn to the low prices of the garments and often defer to quality due to the low prices. There was no consensus if consumers would purchase higher quality clothing if their budget increased or if the prices were more affordable. Some participants mentioned that instead, they would be more inclined to make even more fast-fashion purchases. However, the industry must offer more competitive prices for high-quality fashion and ensure that high-quality clothing is not necessarily synonymous to fashion that is limited to classic or basic pieces. This information is especially relevant to brands that are not fast-fashion as they need to understand why an increase in budget would not shift consumers to different pricing categories in apparel, as this reveals a huge risk for apparel brands outside of the fast-fashion market. This information is also relevant for fast-fashion research as it can only give greater incentive to increasingly tighten the supply chain, reduce quality, and gives consumers more on-demand, inexpensive clothing.

There is a fundamental shift in consumer's mindsets as revealed by the findings of this study. Based on McNeill and Moore (2015), focusing on "social" consumers, those who have an interest in changing their behaviour, but are either unaware how to do so or are limited by the previously discussed factors presented in this study, would be a beneficial way to begin changing Canadian consumer's shopping behaviour. In addition, it is pertinent to consider the "sacrifice" consumers as previous research revealed there can often be a negative stigma associated to ethically minded consumers (Johnstone, 2015). If sacrifice consumers have a negative perception amongst "social" and "self" consumers, there may be more resistance to change. "Sacrifice" consumers need to be champions and leaders of change that are prominent on social media platforms as this was revealed to be a significant channel for participant's shopping influence. Given the time restrictions and limitations within this study, a thorough understanding of where each participant could be categorized was not revealed.

## **5.2 Limitations and further research**

Procedural limitation that existed within the study include the participant sample and methodology. The sample size limits the findings and cannot generalize all Canadian consumers. Further research should extend to other Canadian cities and smaller communities to see if the results will be consistent. Snowball sampling can limit diversity and while this sample did have diversity in terms of age, occupation and demographic backgrounds, including non-active fast-fashion participants, and older participants could also reveal important insight in changing consumer behaviour. Including data in further research using questionnaires could limit social desirability biases along with developing hypotheses on consumer's fast-fashion behaviour. Lastly, time constraints prevented the research in expanding into other areas and focused only on why there is a paradox amongst consumers in changing their buying behaviour. An expansion of this study could include research into circular economies within the apparel

industry, conducting quantitative data into financial impacts on the consumer from the industry, and further qualitative data on the sociological impacts on the consumer.

Further research into each theme can provide industry leaders additional information. To better understand the implications with the theme of culture, future research in understanding how influential social media posts from influencers and friends is encouraged to better understand the sociological implications presented in this study. The findings from this further research could be helpful for marketers to better plan their marketing strategies going forward and for retailers to understand how to remain competitive. Secondly, as previously mentioned, creating increased awareness on the environmental and socio-economic issues is necessary to increase motivation. Therefore, a thorough understanding is needed to understand how this should be communicated to consumers and which channel would be most significant to ensure this is adequately completed. Thirdly, while participants revealed they do not have positive associations to co-branding, further research should analyze previous co-branding alliances and the impact it had on fast-fashion retailers and luxury brands. In addition, further research is needed to better understand the factors that draw consumers to co-branding collections to determine if opportunities exist to shift consumption behaviours. Next, further research is required to understand the correlation between a consumer's price sensitivity and their quality expectations for the apparel industry, whether it be fast-fashion retailers or high-quality fashion brands. This is relevant in order to understand how quality and price can affect a fast-fashion consumers behaviour during purchase-decision-making. As previously mentioned, the limitations within this study prevented the analysis to determine what type of consumer each participant is. Therefore, further research should be pursued to better understand Canadian consumers within each of these contexts and how they relate to each other. It would be important to understand if "sacrifice" consumers can have a positive influence on "social" and "self" consumers. The results from this research could be relevant to

sociologists trying to better understand Canadian consumers and for sustainability leaders to understand how they can begin shifting mindsets. Mitigating any negative stigma associated to “sacrifice” consumers or to consumers who are socially-and-environmentally-conscious is key in onboarding other consumers to publicly change their behaviour, as argued in other research.

## **6. | Conclusion**

While previous research has explained the attitude-behaviour gap within apparel consumption, minimal research is available to understand opportunities within a consumer’s consumption habits. This study looks to understand the Canadian consumer’s barriers to change their behaviour and identify opportunities to change consumption behaviours. Using the grounded theory methodology, five themes were identified in the analysis of 14 in-depth interviews. This study reveals new insight into consumer’s fast-fashion consumption habits and provides disrupters in the industry invaluable information. While fashion previously was used as a conduit to self-express, this study reveals that fashion, particularly fast-fashion, may now relate to how one self-identifies within the culture of social media. Understanding how culture and self-perception influences a consumer in the industry is fundamental in closing the attitude-behaviour gap and intention-behaviour gap. Canadian consumerism can begin to shift to a more responsible approach, where consumers are more conscious of the environmental risks and socio-economic risks, once industry leaders better understand the prevalence of the consumer’s culture and how they relate to their own self-identity.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

#### Pre-recruiting Questionnaire

##### **FILTER 1**

How old are you?

- 20 - 35 years old: Filter 2
- Older or younger: stop

##### **FILTER 2**

Have you shopped at a fast-fashion retailer at least 3x in the past year?

- No: Stop
- Yes: Filter 3

##### **FILTER 3**

Please name a few you know and/or have shopped at.

- To determine their knowledge of the industry and the scope. Do they know many companies? Or just a few?

*Good morning / afternoon / evening. My name is Nalani and I am a current Masters student at the NOVA School of Business and Economics where I am conducting research for my Master's thesis. I would like to interview you for approximately 30 to 60 minutes, using an in-depth interview. You will be able to say whatever comes to your mind. Please note, there are no right or wrong answers. For the purpose of analyzing this interview, I would like to record it. I assure you, it will remain anonymous and confidential and you will not be contacted for this project after this conversation. Are you comfortable with this?*

**Demographic Questions:** - Gender, age, education, current profession, spending habits

**Initial Question:** How would you define the fast-fashion industry?

- How often do you make fast-fashion purchases?
- What are motivators for you to visit a fast-fashion store?
- Do you ever feel pressured to make continuing fast-fashion purchases?
- What are the feelings you have before, during, and after your fast-fashion experience?
- How do you perceive yourself when buying fast-fashion?
- What is your perception on the quality of the garments you are purchasing?
- How long is a typical life-cycle of a fast-fashion garment you wear? (i.e. how many times do you wear it before it's end-use?)



- On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how important is quality to you when buying clothing?
- Why do you typically discard a fast-fashion item? (boredom, quality?)
- How do you discard? What are the discarding options you are aware of?
- If they do not discard, have feelings of indifference, understand motivators needed to recycle.
- Discuss budgeting on apparel and how participant feels on shifting budget to better-quality clothing.
- If your disposable income was higher, would you purchase higher-quality?
- If answer is yes, ask about volume. If no, why?

### **Sustainability**

- What are your feelings towards sustainability (not necessarily in relation to apparel industry)?
- If participant has limited knowledge on environmental impacts of fast-fashion, provide facts and ask for a comment.
- How likely would company's sustainability program influence your brand loyalty?
- Do you feel if you were more aware of the impacts of fast-fashion that you would make conscious decisions?
- How would you feel if you had a limited wardrobe? What prevents you from maintaining one? How would friends, family, peers view you?
- Do you purchase sustainable clothing? Why or why not?

### **Socio-economic factors**

- Do you ever experience stress on your finances due to your fast-fashion habits? Would you take on debt for fast-fashion purchases?
- Would you make cuts on your current spending to change your spending habits? If so on what and how?
- On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how important are your friends/family opinions on fast-fashion?
- On a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest), how important is fast-fashion on your social media presence?
- How do you think social media impacts your fast-fashion purchases?